Living with History, 1914-1964
Verpoest, Luc, Bullock, Nicholas

Published by Leuven University Press

Verpoest, Luc and Nicholas Bullock.
Living with History, 1914-1964: Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World Wars and the Role of Heritage Preservation / La reconstruction en Europe après la Première et la Seconde Guerre Mondiale et le rôle de la conservation des monuments historiques.


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Housing for War Victims, 1946-1948

A Problematic Building Project by the Belgian Government

Fredie Floré

It is well known that the reconstruction of the housing patrimony in Belgium after the Second World War got off to a slow start, mainly due to the crisis in the construction industry and the ongoing ideological differences between the Catholic and socialist parties in government. Furthermore, reconstruction in Belgium strongly focused on the reorganisation of the monetary situation, on the normalisation of production and living conditions and on organising supplies. Although the housing shortage was huge - at least 200,000 new houses were needed - the first structural measure of the post-war housing policy was not taken until August 1948. However, the relatively late development of a general housing policy does not imply that the Belgian government did not take any measures for dealing with housing problems between 1945 and 1948. For instance, in 1945 several laws were enacted to 'protect' tenants from extremely high rents. Other early governmental initiatives were directly related to the reconstruction of particular fragments of the housing stock. The Ministry of Fuel and Energy developed a housing programme for miners, and the Ministry of Reconstruction took several measures to stimulate construction of housing for war victims - people who had suffered material losses due to the war. Both housing programmes stimulated private building and reconstruction initiatives, but also included a form of collective housing. This contribution focuses on the 'National Building Sites', the collective housing projects for war victims.

In the first years after the Second World War, the housing shortage was an important concern of the Ministry of Reconstruction. One of the tasks of this Ministry was “the restoration of private property destroyed or damaged by the war”. This included the repair of housing. Two successive Ministers of Reconstruction, with two different political orientations, set out the main direction of the post-war reconstruction policy. The first one was the communist Jean Terfve (1907-1978), who became minister on 31 March 1946. On 20 March 1947, the Catholic Robert De Man (1900-1978) succeeded him. Not surprisingly, this succession led to heated political debates. However, it did not take any measures for dealing with housing problems between 1945 and 1948. For instance, in 1945 several laws were enacted to protect tenants from extremely high rents. Other early governmental initiatives were directly related to the reconstruction of particular fragments of the housing stock. The Ministry of Fuel and Energy developed a housing programme for miners, and the Ministry of Reconstruction took several measures to stimulate construction of housing for war victims - people who had suffered material losses due to the war. Both housing programmes stimulated private building and reconstruction initiatives, but also included a form of collective housing. This contribution focuses on the ‘National Building Sites’, the collective housing projects for war victims.

For a further discussion of the reconstruction and of housing policy in Belgium after the Second World War, see Goossens, Het sociaal huisvestingsbeleid in België.

The first implementation decree related to the De Taeye act was taken on 22 August 1948.

For a study on the post-war housing projects for miners, see Floré, Lessen in goed wonen. Woonvoorziening in België 1945-1958, 55-74.


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not cause a radical change in the Ministry’s housing programme. In general De Man continued the initiatives of his predecessor, including the project of the National Building Sites.9

To a large extent the housing policy of Terfve and De Man was related to the reconstruction efforts of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Charles de Broqueville (1860-1940), after the First World War. De Broqueville as well mainly encouraged private building initiatives in combination with a series of housing projects for war victims built by the national government.10 Several historians have shown that these housing projects were not successful. I shall argue that history repeated itself in the late 1940s, as the National Building Sites of the Ministry of Reconstruction were similarly problematic.

The National Building Sites under the Ministry of Jean Terfve

One of the most important tasks of the Ministry of Reconstruction and the former Ministry of War Damage was the development of a law that would regulate the amount of compensation for war victims. Shortly after the war this issue led to intense political debates. In particular, the question of whether or not a ‘full compensation’ should be awarded led to disagreements. Not until 1 October 1947 was consensus reached on a bill, during the mandate of De Man, by the majority of the coalition government of the time, composed of socialists and Catholics - the first post-war government without communists.11 This law on war damage stipulated that individuals who owned a house damaged by the war and who took the initiative to restore it were entitled to compensation. ‘Small’ owners would receive ‘full compensation’.12 ‘Large’ owners were only entitled to partial compensation, but were able to borrow money at a low interest rate (2.0-2.75%).13 The total amount of compensation fees was estimated at 55 billion Belgian francs.14 Before the law on war damage was approved, the government had already taken some preliminary measures to encourage private building initiatives. Beginning in 1940, homeowners wishing to start reconstruction of their properties could apply for a ‘repair loan’ at a low interest rate. After December 1945 they could also obtain an interest-free advance on their compensation.15

Besides offering financial support for private reconstruction works, the Ministry of Reconstruction also reserved a part of the scarce amount of building materials for the war victims and provided technical and administrative advice. In practice the Ministry therefore collaborated with the cooperatives of war victims. These cooperatives were run by war victims, but were subsidised and supervised by the government.16 In 1948 there were 47 recognised cooperatives spread out over the country. Most of them had started in 1946. Initially, during Terfve’s mandate, they had mainly concentrated on the distribution of building materials. During De Man’s mandate more materials became available, so the cooperatives were able to devote more attention to their advisory task. War victims could then obtain advice on the most economical way to finance their project and on the available grants. Furthermore, the cooperatives supervised private building sites on request. The aim was to combine the logistic and construction work of individual projects so that the administrative procedures could be streamlined and the building costs reduced. This method thus supported the private initiative, but simultaneously offered the financial advantages of larger construction projects.

9 An important part of the archives of Robert De Man was destroyed after his death. A selection of his Ministry documents is preserved by KADOC in Louvain. The author has so far been unable to locate the Ministry archives of Jean Terfve. They are not in the Rijksarchief (National Archives) or in the Centre des Archives Communistes en Belgique (Centre of the Communist Archives in Belgium).

10 Shortly after the First World War, the government and public opinion considered financial compensation offered by the government to war victims sufficient. Initially the material reconstruction depended entirely on private initiative. However, around 1919, Minister of Internal Affairs Charles de Broqueville also proposed a collective housing programme, which implied that the government in the blighted areas would build 2,000 labourers’ houses and 2,000 farmsteads. The further development of this building program was left to the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten (Service of Devastated Regions). Ultimately only 625 workers’ houses were built, and no farmsteads. The project was stopped by Jules Renkin who succeeded de Broqueville as Minister of Internal Affairs. Maes, “De tuinwijksexperimenten in het kader van de Belgische wederopbouw”.

11 It would then take until September 1948 before the law could be put into effect.

12 The content of the law on war damage of 01.10.1947 is further discussed in “Oorlogsschade”. A ‘full compensation’ equalled the value of the damage on 31 August 1939, multiplied by a coefficient.

13 See Luykx, Politieke geschiedenis, II, 458.
Because the private construction activities were not seen as sufficient to solve the housing shortage, around 1946 Minister Terfve launched the National Building Sites programme. This involved the government itself building several series of houses in the hardest-hit areas of the country. The war victims were able to acquire these houses 'in exchange' for the indemnification they were entitled to, if necessary with the difference in the form of a low-interest loan. In anticipation of the payment of their compensation the future owners would be able to rent the houses. In the end the rent would be deducted from the total cost price.

Thirteen National Building Sites started during Terfve's mandate. They were situated by the coast, in Antwerp and around Ghent, Waver, Mons and Malmédy. In each case the state had bought building land from the community or from another public institution. Generally a National Building Site consisted of a small 'district' containing 8 to at most 60 houses. With the exception of a few projects, no extra functions were added. The Ministry itself appointed an architect and sometimes also an urban developer for each project. For example, two of the first National Building Sites were assigned to the architects Renaat Braem (1910-2001), Géo Brosens and Flor Laforce. At first Braem—who had strong sympathies for the communist movement—had been invited to work in Terfve's cabinet, but he exchanged this offer for a direct engagement in building projects. Together with Brosens and Laforce he was asked to design and partially build two small housing districts for war victims: on Jacob Smitsstraat in Borgerhout and near Het fortje (the fortress) in Deurne. As Francis Strauven explains, the National Building Site in Borgerhout is “a simple and unpretentious ensemble”.

Only part of the original design was realized. On both sides of the Jacob Smitsstraat, Braem, Brosens and Laforce have built thirty more or less identical brick houses with a built surface area of 45 square metres with one storey and a flat roof. The houses in the centre of the ensemble are set back from the street, a common design feature in Belgian garden settlements that locally broadens the perspective and counters the ‘monotony’ of the scene. Initially the space in front of the houses was considered a public area, but eventually it was divided into a series of separate front gardens. The street frontage is dominated by a horizontal line, which is emphasised by the use of differently coloured bricks for the ground floor and the first storey. At the north end, two three-storey apartment blocks border the ensemble. Braem, Brosens and Laforce designed compact and comfortable houses for the war victims, based on modernist functionalist architecture.

14 KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report "Ministère de la Reconstruction". See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.3: "Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du Ministère de la Reconstruction".
15 Ibidem, 38-87. The article presents several National Building Site projects.
16 Terfve's cabinet collaborated with the following architects and urban developers on the National Building Sites: Renaat Braem, Géo Brosens, Peter De Groote, Gustave De Preter, M.C. Dethiou, Albert Devillers, P. De Vroye, Jean Hebbelinck, L. Kuypers, Flor Laforce, Maurice Lhoir, Louis Mettewie, René Panis, Antoine Pompe and Em. G. Rulens.
17 The worst damage from the war was in Antwerp, the coast and the Ardennes.
18 See “Chantiers Nationaux. D’après un entretien avec M. Marcel Stévigny”.
19 KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.3: “Quand l’état construit. Le beau cadeau de M. Terfve", newspaper cutting without reference, s.d. [ca. 1950].
20 The National Building Sites which started during Terfve's mandate were situated in Borgerhout, Deurne (2 sites), Erveld-Rieme (2 sites), Heist-aan-Zee, Limal, Malmédy, Nieuwpoort, Ostend, Ottignies, Saint-Ghislain and Stavelot. In general private grounds were not expropriated or bought for the National Building Sites. See "Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du Ministère de la Reconstruction".
21 Ibidem, 58-87. The article presents several National Building Site projects.
22 Thirteen National Building Sites started during Terfve's mandate in Terfve’s cabinet collaborated with the following architects and urban developers on the National Building Sites: Renaat Braem, Géo Brosens, Peter De Groote, Gustave De Preter, M.C. Dethiou, Albert Devillers, P. De Vroye, Jean Hebbelinck, L. Kuypers, Flor Laforce, Maurice Lhoir, Louis Mettewie, René Panis, Antoine Pompe and Em. G. Rulens.
23 Ibidem, Renaat Braem, 57.
24 Braem made designs for six National Building Sites, but only these two were partly realised. See Braeken, “Nationale Werf Antwerpen”.
25 Ibidem, 58.
26 The project started on 02.12.1946. See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, “Nota aan de heer Minister. Stand der nationale werven op 15 maart 1949”. 1. See also Braeken, "Nationale Werf Borgerhout".

14 KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report "Ministère de la Reconstruction". See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.3: "Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du Ministère de la Reconstruction".
15 Between 1940 and April 1949 the government granted 66,143 repair loans for a total sum of BEF 7,975,647,099. The attribution of interest-free advances was regulated by the law of 21.12.1945. According to this law an advance could not exceed the cost price of restoration on 31 August 1939. Between December 1945 and April 1949 the government granted 41,584 interest-free advances for a total sum of BEF 2,202,953,079. See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report "Ministère de la Reconstruction". Between 1940 and April 1949 the government granted 66,143 repair loans for a total sum of BEF 7,975,647,099. The attribution of interest-free advances was regulated by the law of 21.12.1945. According to this law an advance could not exceed the cost price of restoration on 31 August 1939. Between December 1945 and April 1949 the government granted 41,584 interest-free advances for a total sum of BEF 2,202,953,079. See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report "Ministère de la Reconstruction". Between 1940 and April 1949 the government granted 66,143 repair loans for a total sum of BEF 7,975,647,099. The attribution of interest-free advances was regulated by the law of 21.12.1945. According to this law an advance could not exceed the cost price of restoration on 31 August 1939. Between December 1945 and April 1949 the government granted 41,584 interest-free advances for a total sum of BEF 2,202,953,079. See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report "Ministère de la Reconstruction".
On the ground floor were an entrance, a hall (with room to store bicycles), a toilet, a living room and a separate kitchen. On the first floor there were three bedrooms with built-in cupboards, a bathroom (with a shower and a washbasin) and a storeroom. The houses in Borgerhout were wider than they were deep, which implied that they received a great deal of sunlight. Only the cellar (with separate rooms for coal and food storage) did not receive direct daylight.

Braem, Brosens and Laforce applied the same housing typology in their design for the National Building Site in Deurne. This project consisted of twelve houses. Together with a second housing complex for war victims designed by architect L. Kuypers, it was part of a redevelopment scheme that Braem and the engineer Mennes designed for the area around one of the few unclassified fortresses in Antwerp. This urban plan shows a green district with terraced houses and low apartment blocks situated along the borders of the site and along the contours of the former military settlement. An earlier design by Braem and Mennes for the area contained many fewer houses and had redesigned the ruins of the fort in the middle into a centre for sports and culture. However, the plan was revised at the request of the community, which could not or did not want to invest in a large recreational programme. Eventually the new urban development scheme was only partly completed as well.

Seen within the context of Braem’s oeuvre, the National Building Sites in Borgerhout and Deurne had rather modest proportions. According to Strauven this was the result of the overall austerity policy of the post-war period and probably also of failure of vision by the communist party, which soon would fall into disgrace of the public opinion. Indeed, in the course of the fifties, when Braem again revised the urban development plans for the area around the fortress, the new designs carried out his utopian vision far more explicitly. For example in around 1958 Braem, together with architect Oktaaf de Koninckx, developed a zoning plan in which the ruins of the fort were transformed into a ‘house of sports’.

The basic principles of the modernist interpretation of a ‘functional’ house were formulated at the CIAM-congress in Frankfurt (1929). They devoted explicit attention to comfort and hygiene, to a compact organisation of functions, to the presence of public facilities (electricity, gas, water) and to the use of standard building products. See Desombre, Spitaels and Herregodts, “Aspecten van sociale architectuur”.

The building of the National Building Site of Braem, Brosens and Laforce in Deurne started on 02.01.1947. KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, 1.

"Le chantier national de Deurne". 27 On the ground floor were an entrance, a hall (with room to store bicycles), a toilet, a living room and a separate kitchen. On the first floor there were three bedrooms with built-in cupboards, a bathroom (with a shower and a washbasin) and a storeroom. The houses in Borgerhout were wider than they were deep, which implied that they received a great deal of sunlight. Only the cellar (with separate rooms for coal and food storage) did not receive direct daylight.

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Braem, Brosens and Laforce, Urban layout of the National Building Site in Borgerhout, published in La Maison, IV (1948) 3, 68. [Louvain, K.U.Leuven, Universiteitsbibliotheek: Z6817]

Braem, Brosens and Laforce, National Building Site in Borgerhout. [Photograph by the author]

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29 “Le chantier national de Deurne”.

29.2 Renaat Braem, Géo Brosens and Flor Laforce, Urban layout of the National Building Site in Borgerhout, published in La Maison, IV (1948) 3, 68. [Louvain, K.U.Leuven, Universiteitsbibliotheek: Z6817]
The surrounding buildings were a combination of residential towers and terraced houses, which included the existing houses for war victims. Several contemporary drawings by Braem evoked the new community life which the district was supposed to generate. They showed a colourful neighbourhood with the ‘house of sports’ at its centre.

One of the most appealing drawings pictures the interior of the sports hall where a vast group of adults in identical tights is performing gymnastics.

Nearly every National Building Site which started during Terfve’s mandate had modest proportions and was characterised by a pragmatic approach. In the case of some projects, such as the one in Borgerhout, a clear attempt was made to give the new district a specific or local character using simple design features based on the use of materials, the combination of building volumes or housing typologies, etc. Often references were made to the regional architecture or use of materials. The National Building Site in Malmédy by architect Albert Devillers is a clear example of this. It consists of fifty single-family houses with a natural stone foundation, which refers to the traditional architecture of the Ardennes. Other National Building Sites did not clearly express the ambition to give the new district its own character, and consisted of not much more than a plain repetition of terraced houses with a backyard. This is the case with the project by architect Louis Mettiewie in Ertvelde near Ghent.

In general, the houses of the National Building Sites had a built surface area of about 45 m² and had one storey. As in Deurne and in Borgerhout, on the ground floor there was usually an entrance, a hall or a staircase, a toilet, a living room and a separate kitchen. Several projects also integrated a storeroom or a laundry room on the ground floor. Houses with a commercial function, like the corner houses in the district for war victims in Heist-aan-Zee, were exceptional. On the upper floor there were usually two or three bedrooms and in most but not all cases there was also a bathroom. The National Building Sites in Nieuwpoort or in Heist-aan-Zee clearly...

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30 Strauven, Renaat Braem, 58.
31 Between 1959 and 1963 ‘het fortje’ was actually transformed to a centre for sports and culture. See Floré, “Sport- en cultuurcentrum Arena (Fortje)”.
32 Most of the drawings of the housing district around the fortress are kept in AAM, Renaat Braem.
33 Some houses were built with the grey sandstone of the Aywaille area, others with the ochre-coloured sandstone of the region of Malmédy. See “Le chantier national de Malmédy”.
34 This project consisted of a row of eight houses in red masonry. See “Le chantier national d’Ertvelde-Rieme”.
35 The National Building Site in Heist-aan-Zee was designed by the urban developer Gustave De Preter and the architect Pierre De Groote. The project consisted of 26 houses.
illustrate this as they provided houses with or without a bathroom. Furthermore it must be mentioned that the bathrooms in the new houses for war victims were not always 'equipped'.

The layout of the houses of some of the National Building Sites started during Terfve's mandate was clearly related to those designed by Braem, Brosens and Laforce. This is the case with the project by architect Kuypers in Deurne and by architect Em. G. Rulens and urban designer Antoine Pompe (1873-1980) in Ottignies. Other projects more closely related to the pre-war housing typologies of the Société Nationale des Habitations et Logements à Bon Marché, albeit without a parlour and with a 'working kitchen' instead of a 'kitchen-living room' in combination with a laverie (washroom). The housing project in Heist-aan-Zee is a good example. The houses of type A were about 5.5 m wide and consisted of a series of separate rooms connected by a stair-case on the side. The lavatory and the storage room were situated in an extension at the back of the house and were only accessible via the terrace. In an article in the specialists' journal La Maison the architect Pierre De Groote explained that he designed this extension “to avoid the inhabitant being tempted to construct at the back, with the use of boards, rusted steel plates and bituminous cardboard, a sordid hut to arrange his tools, store coals or breed his rabbits”. To make sure that the future inhabitants would not ‘dishonour’ the architecture of their houses with shabby do-it-yourself-constructions, De Groote incorporated similar extensions in his design. Clearly he did not mean to radically reject the existing living habits. He rather wanted to design them in a 'better' way, while carefully reorienting them, for example by introducing a separate kitchen instead of a kitchen-living room, which was still common in working-class homes. Then again, the houses of type A did not have a bathroom yet.
On a constructional level the National Building Sites designed during Terfve’s mandate were not very experimental. Most of the houses were made of masonry and wooden carpentry. According to engineer Marcel Stevigny, director-general of the Ministry of Reconstruction during De Man’s mandate, from the very beginning of the programme the choice was made to work with traditional construction methods so as not to violate the ‘real contemporary taste’ of the future inhabitants: “If, during the conception of the plans, we do not know anything about the individuals who are going to occupy our houses, we nevertheless cannot ignore their mentality, formed by the local and national traditions, so that it would be wrong to shock without a very long, preceding adaptation ... too long for us to deal with in our field of work”.41
Still, if non-traditional building techniques were used, it usually involved parts of the construction that remained invisible after the building was finished. For example, the houses of the National Building Site in Saint-Ghislain had a light roof construction, made of steel.42 Furthermore, as they were situated on swampy and unstable ground, they were built on a special foundation system with concrete beams.43

Although there were clear differences in the quality of the different National Building Sites, to a certain extent Minister Terfve offered the war victims a consistent housing model. The National Building Sites were relatively small ‘garden settlements’ with mainly traditionally constructed, terraced houses.44 The fact that the communist Minister did not devote more attention to community life in the new housing projects is somewhat surprising. Braem’s first urban plan for the district around the fortress was one of the very few designs that explicitly devoted attention to the social aspects of living in a community and to the integration of public facilities. Ultimately this project also consisted only of housing. Several explanations can be found for the Ministry’s restricted interest in the community life in the National Building Sites. First of all the size of the projects generally was quite small. Moreover, as was the case in Deurne, the communities often played a decisive role. Finally, the reasons Strauven mentioned to explain the ‘discrete’ character of the housing projects of Braem, Brosens and Laforce, also apply to the whole of the National Building Sites built under Terfve. The overall austerity policy of the post-war period and the decreasing popularity of the Communist Party did not at all encourage investments on top of the construction costs of the houses, which were already high.

41 For the original quote: “Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du Ministère de la Reconstruction”, 60.
42 The National Building Site in Saint-Ghislain was designed by the architects René Panis and Maurice Lhoir. The project consisted of 60 houses. A large part of Saint-Ghislain had been destroyed by the bombardments of April and May 1944. After the liberation Panis designed a new urban layout for the city. See Pierard, “Mons (Hainaut)”. The foundations were built by the Entreprises Générales Alex Ruëlle et Cie, Brussels. The calculation was the work of the engineer J. Grondel. See “Le chantier national de Saint-Ghislain (advertisement)”. However the building experiment received a lot of criticism, especially about the choice of the problematic building site. See several cuttings in APA, Léon Stynen, 1 b-c (preliminary numbering): Maisons Mineurs I and II.
43 For the history of the concept of the ‘garden district’ in Belgium, see Smets, De ontwikkeling van de tuinwijkgedachte.
The National Building Sites under the Ministry of Robert De Man

All the architects and urban developers of the National Building Sites started during Terfve’s mandate were appointed directly by the Minister. For the war victims’ housing projects these private designers had to collaborate with the Direction Centrale des Services Techniques (Central Direction of Technical Services) of the Ministry of Reconstruction. However, at the end of his mandate, Terfve himself introduced a procedure for a less arbitrary selection of designers. On 22 February 1947 he launched an open architectural competition on the following topic: “the study of a model layout of a house for war victims, to be built in group, according to the choice of the competitors in one of the following areas: the coast, rural Flanders, an urban agglomeration (Antwerp, Brussels or Liège), a coal basin, the Ardennes”. The aim was to select a series of architects eligible for building new houses for war victims under authority of the Ministry of Reconstruction. The prize money was 500,000 Belgian francs, to be divided among the laureates. The deadline, 24 March 1947, was during the term of office of the new minister, De Man.

The competition programme described a fictitious flat site with sandy soil and a trapezium-shaped contour, bordered by two roads of different sizes and surrounded by one-storey houses. In accordance with the existing National Building Sites the Ministry asked to design a low-density housing project with 32 to 37 houses per hectare. The houses were allowed a built volume of 250 to 300 m³ and had to be suitable for a family of two parents and three children (two boys and one girl or one boy and two girls). Many architects showed interest in the competition. The Ministry received about 455 applications, of which 28 were awarded commissions. Amongst the laureates were Groupe EGAU, Gaston Eysselinck (1907-1953), Jean De Ligne (1890-1985), Gustave Herbosch, Isia Isgour (1913-1967), Henri Saint-Jean and Robert Schuiten (1912-1997). The jury mainly consisted of architects, some of whom were attached to a Ministry. The other members were the director-general of the Ministry of Reconstruction, the commissioner general of tourism, a counsellor of the Department of Fine Arts of the Ministry of Public Education, a sculptor, a landscape architect, the mayor of Saint-Ghislain and the secretary-general of the association Ardenne et Gaume. The war victims themselves were not represented in the jury.

The selected competition projects were variations on the garden settlement model. The houses were clustered in little groups, had a front door at street level and had a private backyard. As was the case with the first houses for war victims, there was a clear distinction between the living areas on the ground level and the sleeping areas on the first floor. There was also a ‘working kitchen’ and a separate living and dining room instead of a ‘kitchen-living room’ in combi-

45 “Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du Ministère de la Reconstruction”, 61.
46 It is not clear what was the immediate cause of the change in selection procedure.
47 For the original quote: Architecture Urbanisme Habitation, (1947) 12, 198. (Special issue on the competition.)
48 Ibidem, 183.
49 EGAU stands for Études en Groupe d’Architecture et d’Urbanisme (Group Studies on Architecture and Urbanism). This team of architects was led by Charles Carlier, Hyacinthe Lhoest and Jules Mozin. The other competition laureates were: Robert Busch & Gaston Marchot, André Cambier, Auguste Daloze & Gaublomme, Carlo De Coninck, Marcel Gérard, Daniel Lipszyc, Edgard Lelubre & Robert Verbanck, Franz Mertens, Louis Mettewie, Paul Tombœur & Joseph Closse, Gérard Traets, Willy Valcke, Maurice Vancauwelaert, Pierre Vandenberghe & Louis De Ro, Willy Van Gils & Clara Bourgonjon, Marcel Viehoff, Pierre Vinck and Jean Wijnen. Two entries of Franz Mertens, Louis Mettewie and Henri Saint-Jean were awarded.
50 Eight out of fifteen jury members were architects: Victor Bourgeois, Jan De Braey, Paul L. Fitschy (l’Equerre), Axel W. Lemesre, Adolphe Puissant, Léon Stynen, Marcel van Goethem and Charles Van Nueten. Léon Stynen was at the time attached to the Ministry of Fuel and Energy, Axel W. Lemesre to the Ministry of Reconstruction.

17.7 Drawing of the fictitious site of the National Building Site competition, published in Architecture Urbanisme Habitation, 1947, 12, 183. [Louvain, K.U.Leuven, Centrale bibliotheek: Z10556]
nation with a ‘washroom’.

Unlike the first National Building Sites, the houses of the competition projects had a separate bathroom on the upper level and a toilet inside the house. The toilet was often situated near the façade. This was possible thanks to the development of the sewer system after the Second World War.

Like the first National Building Sites, the selected competition designs were modest in their proportions and programme. Again several architects tried - some of them with more imagination than others - to give the district a specific or local character using minimal resources. Some referred to the traditional architecture and materials of the region. This is the case with the projects by Gustave Herbosch, Isia Isgour, Louis Mettewie or Robert Schuiten.

Other architects devoted special attention to the district's public space. For example, André Cambier preserved a central space for a sports field around which were arranged small clusters of houses with modular layouts and façades. As the journal Architecture Urbanisme Habitation noted after the closing of the competition, not all of the selected projects were of equally good quality. Nevertheless they were all awarded commissions. After all, the Ministry did not want to reach a consensus on one or more model houses for war victims. The competition was rather meant as a democratic way of collecting a pool of competent architects.

In the course of his mandate, Minister De Man asked several of the competition laureates to design and build a new National Building Site. Among them were André Cambier, Isia Isgour, Henri Saint-Jean and Groupe EGAU. In total De Man built ten extra housing districts for war victims, situated on the coast, near Aalst, Antwerp, Charleroi, Bastogne, Mons and Liège.

In general the built projects were closely related to the competition designs. The garden district model remained the standard. "Whether on large, average, or small building sites, we do not want architectural ensembles to be monotonous or stiff", explained Marcel Stevigny. "The organisation of houses in groups of two, four or at most six, in the middle of open green spaces, and

51 The jury members mentioned here are Marcel Stévigny, Arthur Haulot, Em. Langui, Jancelevici, Jules Buyssens, Désiré De Meyer and Maurice Cosyn. The NPO Ardenne et Gaume was established in 1941 to help protect sites of remarkable biological, geological, archaeological, historical or esthetical value.

52 Only Herbosch designed houses with a bedroom (for the parents) on the ground floor, with a parlour (drawing room), a laverie (washroom) and a salle commun-cuisine (kitchen-living room).

53 Only M. Gérard designed houses without a bathroom. Herbosch designed houses with a bathroom on the ground floor.

54 See Desombre, Spitaels and Herregodts, "Aspecten van sociale architectuur".

55 A few years later Isgour opted firmly for a modernist language. Jean-Marc Basyn situates this moment around 1952, with the design for a theatre in the garden settlement Meulenberg in the Limburg mining city of Houthalen (in cooperation with Constantin Brodzki). See Basyn, ‘Isgour, Isia’ and De Caigny, ed, Isia Isgour 1913-1967.

56 "Concours d’Architecture pour l’élaboration de Projets-Types de Maisons d’Habitation pour Sinistrés", 183.

57 “L’Actualité”.

58 These projects were in Muizen, Haine Saint-Pierre, Jambes, Houffalize, Zeebrugge, Bastogne, Mons, Schoten and Angleur. See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, 5-7 and 8.2.3: “Quand l’état construit. Le beau cadeau de M. Terfve”.

in a network of roads bordered by plantings and small gardens, is meant to realise garden districts in the real sense of the word.  

De Man thus continued the National Building Site project set up by Terfve. However, his approach was somewhat different. Especially the frequency with which the two ministers launched new housing projects was not the same. Terfve had opened thirteen building sites in a period of six months. “Full of enthusiasm the communist Minister opened building site after building site” a francophone newspaper recalled. De Man, on the other hand, started ten building sites in a period of two years. This lower productivity was the result of the new Minister’s greater caution. After all, the first National Building Sites revealed an unexpected problem, at least as far as Terfve was concerned. Only very few war victims appeared to be interested in buying the houses built for them. For example, in March 1949 not one of the houses for war victims in Deurne, Heist-aan-Zee, Ostend, Ottignies, Stavelot or Saint-Ghislain finished with the small sizes and the high rents of the houses. History seemed to be repeating itself, as similar problems had occurred with the houses the government built after the First World War. For instance, the inhabitants of the Batavia district in Roeselare - the model housing project of the Service of Devastated Regions - were also discontented with the small sizes and the high rents of the houses.

De Man took several measures so as not to make the same mistake. In March 1948 La Maison mentioned that the Ministry was doing research to gain insight in the number of war victims interested in purchasing a house on a National Building Site. The ministerial report mentioned above stated that De Man only opened new building sites “at the request of the community government and for war victims who were entitled to a sufficient indemnification and who had entered into a contract stating that they would take one of the houses in exchange for their indemnification”. Furthermore, to lower the construction costs, De Man introduced the use of standard construction elements such as doors and window frames. The Service of Devastated Regions had done the same after the First World War.
The new approach had positive results, for example with the National Building Site in Angleur designed by Groupe EGAU. This project consisted of 45 single-family houses of which 39 were for war victims and 6 for the National Society for Cheap Houses and Homes. The slightly sloping site was one hectare in size and was situated in the centre of the community. Several series of five or six houses alternated with small public areas. The houses were made of masonry and, contrary to EGAU’s entry for the competition of the Ministry of Reconstruction, had saddle roofs. [17.9-17.10] The façades were covered partly with yellow sand-lime bricks and partly with white plaster. From the beginning the National Building Site had the support of the community of Angleur. The community administration actively cooperated with the technical research, the subsidy applications for new roads and public services, etc. Furthermore, simultaneously with the construction of the National Building Site, Angleur made up an


17.10 Groupe EGAU, National Building Site in Angleur. [Photograph by the author]

71 Despins, “Le chantier du mois”. Contrary to this article, a report of a few years earlier mentioned only 37 houses for war victims. KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, 5.
72 This had been a private territory, which the government was able to purchase at a ‘special price’. See De Neuville, “Le ’chantier national’ d’habitations pour sinistrés et l’immeuble de l’union coopérative d’Angleur-lez-Liège”.
73 For a description of the applied building materials, see “Chantier national à Angleur”.
74 See Despins, “Le chantier du mois”.

urban district plan for the site and the adjacent neighbourhood. This plan was designed by Karl Bernard, the director of works of the community, in collaboration with EGAU. It stated, for instance, that the houses’ exteriors had to remain unchanged.75

Almost all of the houses of the National Building Site in Angleur were sold before they were finished.76 Several of the future inhabitants were even involved in the project in the design phase. Briefing sessions allowed them to see how the work was progressing and gave them the opportunity to express their wishes. This involvement influenced the final design of the National Building Site. First of all, the houses of EGAU’s competition design were adjusted to the level of indemnification of the future inhabitants.77 This led to two types of minimum houses (type I and II), both with a built surface area of 45 m², and one larger type (type III) with a built surface area of 52.5 m².78 Moreover, since many of the future inhabitants had expressed the wish to have a basement washhouse, Groupe EGAU extended the houses with a semi-basement level. Depending on the location of the house on the sloping building site, the washhouses were situated at the level of the garden or on a small underground terrace. As a result of the alteration in the design the ground floor was elevated above street level. At the front of the house this difference in height was bridged by a sloping front garden, at the back of the house with a terrace and some stairs. The future inhabitants could also request individual alterations to the layout of the ground floor, albeit within certain limits. For example, several war victims asked to remove the wall between the kitchen and the dining area in the houses of type II or III and, instead, to introduce a separation between the dining and the living area. This suggests that these future owners wanted to ensure the possibility of installing a separate salon in combination with a kitchen-living room. Some war victims also asked to divide off a part of the kitchen in the houses of type III in order to create a store.79

In professional circles, the National Building Site in Angleur was considered a success. “We know that the National Building Sites haven’t been a success - for many reasons which we don’t know”, Despins wrote in L’Habitation, “However the one in Angleur is an exception”.80 An important criterion for the success of the project was of course the fact that the war victims accepted the houses. But the new district in Angleur was also explicitly praised for its architectural and urban qualities. In 1952 the National Building Site and a project by Guillissen-Hoa received the joint third and fourth mention in the yearly Prize Van de
EGAU’s project was praised for its spacious layout, its well-studied orientation and for the ‘rational’ planning of the houses. Nevertheless it was clear to the jury members that some compromises had been made. For instance, the jury report explicitly mentioned that the Ministry of Reconstruction had imposed the saddle roofs and the wooden window frames. Far more than the modernist high-rise housing blocks Groupe EGAU simultaneously designed for Angleur and for Plaine de Droixhe, the National Building Site in Angleur first and foremost was a complex exercise in balancing architectural and urban design aspirations and representing a diversity of groups involved in the building process.

The cautious approach of Minister De Man was an effective strategy for the sale of the houses for war victims designed and built during his mandate. By the time the project in Haine Saint-Pierre by architect Isia Isgour was finished all the houses had owners. This was also the case with the National Building Site in Mons by architect André Cambier or the housing district in Bastogne by the architects Henri Saint-Jean and Georges Lambeau (1913-1973).

Only one project dating from the De Man period had remarkably little success. One year after the 34 houses of the National Building Site in Jambes were finished, only seven of them had been sold. It was the first building site opened by the new Minister. The design by the architect Richard Vandendaele still dated from the time when Terfve was Minister of Reconstruction. The clear, functionalist layout of this project’s houses was related to that of the houses of the National Building Sites in Borgerhout and Deurne, but it was more explicitly combined with references to the traditional local architecture. For example, part of the façade of the houses was covered with irregularly shaped sandstone pieces from the Ourthe valley.

De Man tried to promote the previous National Building Sites, in which only a few houses had been sold, by organising opening exhibitions. In the course of 1948 his department invited designers, interior decorators and department stores to furnish one of the houses in each of the recently finished districts in Deurne, Ertevelde-Rieme, Jambes, etc. The goal of these exhibitions was threefold. First of all, the Ministry wanted to demonstrate that it is possible to furnish a modest but sound interior with the legally set amount of compensation for furniture lost in the war. At the same time it wanted to show potential buyers how to equip a rationally designed minimum dwelling in the ‘correct’ way. Finally, the exhibitions were also considered a promotional campaign for the National Building Sites programme. At first, the Ministry itself intended to develop furniture for the National Building Sites. Eric Lemesre, a decorator who graduated at La Cambre in 1944, was engaged for this project. He designed “modular and standardised furniture, suitable for serial production thanks to the contemporary mechanical means”. This involved built-in cupboards and separate furniture elements, which, as far as possible, would be made up by

77 The cost price of a house (without the territory) varied between 242,500 and 276,000 francs. The cost price of a corner house (without the territory) varied between 261,500 and 309,000 francs. KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, 6.
79 See Despins, “Le chantier du mois”.
80 For the original quote: Ibidem.
81 “Le prix Van de Ven 1952”, 61. In 1952 the jury was presided over by Henri Leborgne and further consisted of Jan Dieltjens, Paul Etienne, Henri Gielen, Gaston Marchot and Poly Scherpered. Architect Marc Segers was the laureate. The first, second and fifth mention went respectively to a project of P. Nickmans, of Van Steenberghe and of J. Poskin. The National Building Site in Angleur was the first social housing project awarded by the Prize Van de Ven. See Foncke and Meganck, “De naoorlogse jaren van de Prijs Van de Ven”.
83 The first phase of the social housing project in Plaine de Droixhe in Liège dates from 1951-1956. The first high-rise housing block in Angleur dates from 1951-1954. See Bekaaert and Strauven, Bouwen in België, 304-305. For a discussion on the oeuvre of Groupe EGAU, see for instance De Kooning, “Groupe EGAU”.
84 See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts, 6.
85 Ibidem, 3.
87 See Brussels, Archives Huysmans-Van Loo: “Tenootstelling binnenhuisinrichting” (newspaper cutting without reference).
88 F. Van Loo, “La reconstruction et les ameublements”.

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combining basic units of Norwegian pine, a material of which Belgium still had a certain stock. However, for unknown reasons the furniture project did not take place.

It is likely that the opening exhibitions and the furniture project were meant to temper the criticism of the houses for war victims built under Terfve’s authority. In 1947 and 1948 the daily press was frequently publishing articles stating that these houses were not well designed. For example, Grenz Echo stated that the houses in Malmédy by architect Albert Devillers were so small “that there was no room for a family with four children”.

The surface area of these houses (2 x c 48 m² plus cellar) was similar to that of the houses of most of the National Building Sites. However, their size was not only evaluated in relation to the number of inhabitants. The war victims also had expectations concerning the furnishing of their home and often had to conclude that some furniture elements were far too voluminous for the newly built houses. “All the rooms are too small to allow the installation of a normal furniture”, René Fraikin (1886-1950) wrote in La Nation Belge in June 1947 about the houses built by Terfve.

The author probably was referring to traditional furniture sets such as a dining room composed of a freestanding table, six chairs and a sideboard. An important part of the Belgian furniture market was still geared to this kind of model. The opening exhibitions in the houses of the National Building Sites were meant to set a better example. Although little photographic material is left, descriptions in journals and newspapers tell us that these presentations were quite diverse. For example, the Brussels department store A l’Innovation furnished model homes in the housing district in Deurne by Braem, Brosens and Laforce, with beds in Breton style, classical sculptures, cosy corners, etc.

The same exhibition also included a model living room arranged by the Brussels designers Aimée Huysmans and Raymond Van Loo. They showed prototypes of their own lightweight and modest wooden furniture designs: cupboards, chairs and a coffee table.

Contrary to the ‘stuffed’ interior of A l’Innovation, Huysmans and Van Loo had tried to keep the room as spacious as possible.

The diversity of the interior models suggests that the Ministry of Reconstruction did not have the ambition to improve the visitors’ taste in design. De Man’s cabinet mainly wanted to convince potential buyers that the new houses were large enough provided that sometimes less-conventional (but no less respectable) furniture or furniture sets were used. However, the exhibitions were not very successful in conveying this message. Huysmans and Van Loo remember that the model homes could hardly take away the incomprehension and the distrust of the war victims towards the architecture of Braem, Brosens and Laforce. Sales of the houses built under Terfve’s authority thus remained problematic. It was not only the size of the houses that was being criticised.
The press also mentioned complaints regarding specific projects, such as the absence of a fireplace in the houses in Malmédy.\(^{94}\) Furthermore, some authors stated that the price of dwellings, which oscillated between 200,000 and 340,000 Belgian francs, was still too high.\(^{95}\) Finally, the nickname of the houses, *les maisons Terfve*, was a reminder of the fact that they were originally a communist initiative. By the time the houses were finished this political wing, under influence of international politics, had severely declined in popularity and was no longer represented in the national government.

All things considered, it is not surprising that many war victims preferred to wait for the actual payment of their indemnification and freely choose a new home, instead of buying a house built by the government in a district with other war victims. Interest in the houses of National Building Sites remained rather low, even during De Man’s mandate. The projects built under the authority of the Catholic Minister were less problematic than the first ones, but this was mainly thanks to a detailed preliminary study and to a well-considered selection of projects depending on their chances for success. The majority of the 31 planned National Building Sites were cancelled after this initial study phase.\(^ {96}\) For instance, in Huy Building Sites were cancelled after this.

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The cancelled National Building Sites had a quite conventional architectural and urban layout and was built with traditional techniques. Today the housing projects for war victims are neither very innovative nor revealing. The well-known Belgian modernists involved, such as Renaat Braem, Groupe EGAU or Gaston Eysselinck, produced more representative or inspirational designs in earlier or later years. The majority of the National Building Sites had a quite conventional architectural and urban layout and was built with traditional techniques. Today the housing projects seem to blend anonymously into the urban fabric. Only some senior inhabitants and, in a few cases, a street or a district name directly remind us of the original political aspirations of the houses.\(^ {101}\) However, this does not imply that the physical traces of the National Building Sites are of no importance. On the contrary, one might consider them unique, silent and anti-monumental reminders of wartime destruction. Furthermore, the National Building Sites establish tangible evidence of the recurrent attempts, small-scale successes and many failures of the national government in dealing with the loss of homes in other ways than through stimulating private building initiatives.

### Conclusion

From the early 1950s until today, Belgian historiography has paid very little attention to the National Building Sites programme. This is not surprising. From a strictly urban, architectural or constructional point of view, the housing projects for war victims are neither very innovative nor revealing. The well-known Belgian modernists involved, such as Renaat Braem, Groupe EGAU or Gaston Eysselinck, produced more representative or inspirational designs in earlier or later years. The majority of the National Building Sites had a quite conventional architectural and urban layout and was built with traditional techniques. Today the housing projects seem to blend anonymously into the urban fabric. Only some senior inhabitants and, in a few cases, a street or a district name directly remind us of the original political aspirations of the houses.\(^ {101}\) However, this does not imply that the physical traces of the National Building Sites are of no importance. On the contrary, one might consider them unique, silent and anti-monumental reminders of wartime destruction. Furthermore, the National Building Sites establish tangible evidence of the recurrent attempts, small-scale successes and many failures of the national government in dealing with the loss of homes in other ways than through stimulating private building initiatives.

\(^{93}\) This information is based on several (unpublished) interviews of the author with Raymond Van Loo and Aimée Huysmans, Brussels, 2001.


\(^{95}\) See for instance APA, Léon Stynen, 1 b-c: Maison Mineurs II: “Les réalisations de l’État-construteur: autant en emporte le vent”, *Echo de la Bourse*, 09.01.1948. For the cost price of the houses for war victims, see KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts.


\(^{97}\) For the original quote: Tomson, “Réunion du Conseil d’Administration.”

\(^{98}\) See APA, Léon Stynen, 1 b-c: Maison Mineurs II: “On ne reconstruit pas...”, *La Nation Belge*, 11.06.1947 (cutting) and “Les réalisations de l’État-construteur...”, *Echo de la Bourse*, 09.01.1948 (cutting).

\(^{99}\) See KADOC, Robert De Man, 8.2.2: Report Schodts.

\(^{100}\) Ibidem.

\(^{101}\) For example, there is a street called *Nationale Werf* (National Building Site) in Schoten (near Antwerp).